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"The more variety you have, the more chances there are for surprises and serendipity." JEAN-SEBASTIEN RAYMOND, OF VOLUME

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THE LOVE OF BOOKS, GENTLY USED

Story by JUAN RODRIGUEZ Special to The Gazette

A COUPLE OF MONTHS AGO, WHILE FLIPPING THROUGH A USED BOOK I'D JUST PURCHASED – The Medium is the Massage, a picture pocketbook by Marshall McLuhan, published in 1967 at the height of the media guru's fame – out popped a bookmark that triggered a flood of memories.

It was from the long gone Classic's Bookshop, the original large-scale English store I visited every Saturday on trips downtown from the west end in the mid-1960s. It reminded me of the paperbacks I bought of works by my youthful heroes – Mailer, Camus, Beckett, Pynchon et al – which I devoured curled in the fetal position on my bed. And instantly I recalled the hours that passed by like minutes at Classic's in the bloom of my adolescence.

These days, visits to Indigo or Chapters are merely perfunctory affairs, to check up on what's new. I'd rather spend whatever spare time I have browsing through used-book shops. It's in those places that I know old volumes – and the odd things that pop out (clips of reviews, receipts, notepaper, bookmarks) or the inscriptions, markings and stains on the faded pages – will surprise me and elicit a flutter of discovery ... and re-discovery.

These days used book shops are said to be an endangered species, a victim of the Internet's instant gratification or what's dubbed "news you can use." Yet these shops tell us ephemeral secrets – about changing styles of writing over the years, about typefaces and paper they're printed on, about the people who still swear by books, about the city we live in – that can rarely be told via a few clicks on a computer. At least that's what I desperately wanted to believe when I sought out the views from those on the other side of the counter.

"The used book customer is someone open to possibilities," says Steve Welch of S.W. Welch on St.Viateur St. "A used book store is like a trap: People come in with a book in mind, but as they're drawn into the store they're presented with other possibilities, and they go for it. I'm in it for the treasure hunt."

"The great thing about selling cultural products in a boutique like this," says Jean-Sebastien Raymond, of Volume on Ste. Catherine St. E. near Sanguinet St., "is that there's books from the extreme left and extreme right, from many time frames, and you can find the truth somewhere in between. The more variety you have, the more chances there are for surprises and serendipity."

"I can't emphasize the selection process too much, because I really do believe that each and every book in here is significant in some way," says Bernard Wolf of Odyssey Books on Stanley St. "The large chains need to take everything, and if it doesn't sell they get rid of it, but in the meantime they're soaked up with so-so material. Walk into a good second-hand book shop, and there's an interesting selection made by a person, not a committee."

They are captains of their own centres of the universe. Wolf, 58, a trim man with salt-and-pepper hair, does business near Peel and Ste. Catherine Sts., traditionally the "crossroads of Montreal," where his trade includes McGill and Concordia university students, office workers, spillover from Chapters across the street, and tourists. Raymond, 38, his eyes twinkling on a fleshy face, operates farther east near St. Denis St., the area many francophones consider "le coeur de Montreal," catering largely to UQAM students, tourists and passers-by from the nearby Gay Village. Welch, 51, a large man in a beard and T-shirt and occasional beret, attracts artist-types passing along the trendy St. Viateur strip in polyglot Mile End.

> *"Walk into a good second-hand book shop, and there's an interesting selection made by a person, not a committee."*
> BERNARD WOLF, ODYSSEY BOOKS

They will never make a fortune. They're in it for the love of books.

Wolf, originally from Ontario, entered the business 23 years ago after his video store (among the first in Montreal) folded due to competition from the big chains. "I had the choice of going back to Hamilton or staying here. I mean, what would you do?"

Welch comes from Halifax, where he went to art school, and worked in camera stores and darkrooms, before his mentor (Don Townsend at Schooner Books) suggested bookselling. "I put an ad in A.B. Bookman's Weekly – 'willing young guy wants to learn the business' – and got a job in Massachusetts for a year." He's been operating in Montreal for 20 years.

TYREL FEATHERSTONE THE GAZETTE

Jean-Sebastien Raymond of Volume sells used discs as well as used books. The store takes orders from Francophiles across the continent over the Net.

Raymond, whose Volume also sells used discs, started out at HMV, which he likens to "selling vegetables, where you don't discover much." He took a pay cut, moving on to a 10-year apprenticeship at L'Echange, then stints at CD Dement and Marché de Disque. He opened his own store two years ago.

None of them take books for granted. Wolf refers to an article he read recently in which "the writer imagined our world as it is, with computers and all that, but the book hadn't been invented.

"Then, lo and behold, someone invents the book. Now, think about it. The first time you handle one – where's the power supply? You mean there's no battery in this and I don't have to recharge – how amazing! Random access – I can just go back and the pages don't disappear? You mean I can put a notation directly into it? I can take it into the bath, go to the beach with it, throw it in my bag and take it on the train home, and I don't have to wait for it to boot up? And a bookmark tells me where I was and I just open it up? I mean, all this would be mind-boggling if the book hadn't been around for as long as it has. People would flip out."

And yet, he continues, "there's a perception among some young people that they can get everything they want to know off an Internet search." As an example he takes the First World War, the war to end all wars that turned out to be just the beginning. "They'll read two pages off Google and think they know everything there is to know about it. Well, that's quite the notion: I just read a book by Niall Ferguson on the First World War that runs 1,100 pages."

Still, the young represent the used-book seller's core clientele. "I try to follow where the young people are," says Welch, who's been located in Snowdon, N.D.G. and 15 years on St. Laurent Blvd. "In my final time in N.D.G., I was selling to older people whose libraries had already been farmed. They're not coming in looking for On the Road. Young people are forming their lives and buying more books."

All are adamant that the Internet precludes the element of surprise that's part and parcel of used bookshops. But don't call them Luddites.

"The Internet is a quick fix for many things, and we're lucky to have it," Welch says. "I have a tablet PC on the wireless at home and, when I'm reading a book and want a question answered quickly, I'm right on it. I'm not rushing off to the library but I'm still reading, not watching TV.

"Change is change. It isn't always good, it isn't always bad. When books were invented with moveable type, it was so much better than a scroll."

Raymond's shop, with its array of French-language titles, takes orders from Francophiles across the continent over the Net. "It helps to get the boutique known and is much more efficient than spending $15,000 a year advertising in print."

Wolf adds: "If you need a specific title and can't find it locally, the Internet has become a huge repository of everything. A lot of books that were considered rare all of a sudden aren't."

In that vein, local merchants formed the Used Book Circle, a website (www.usedbookcircle.com) whereby customer requests go directly to Montreal shopkeepers, who conduct a shelf search. The site "tries to head them off at the pass, before they go to Amazon. I think most people prefer to save shipping costs by going locally to pick up their book."

> *"It's the human aspect that's fun ... because the shop takes on the colour of your neighbourhood."*
> JEAN-SEBASTIEN RAYMOND, VOLUME

As for the effect of the Internet on business as a whole, they admit used bookshops are closing left and right, due largely to those who unscrupulously scoop up books to sell from their basement over the Net.

But used bookshops have been around for centuries, says Wolf, adding the business has its ups and downs but finds its equilibrium.

Wescott Books (on Ste. Catherine St. near Fort St.), the most densely packed, comes with cats. The Word (on Milton) is a cornucopia of fine literature and history, an oasis of calm for McGill students. The Bouquinerie on Laurier Ave. E. is like stepping into the Left Bank in Paris. A sense of quietude is shared by most all browsers (except, naturally, Volume with its music). Once they're in side, serendipity takes over: the book you've been wondering about for a lifetime, the book you read decades ago, the book you never knew existed.

"Every once in a while," Welch says, "you're offered a book you don't know anything about. That's when you have to go out on a limb, and then you have to learn about it. It's a search for knowledge, like solving a puzzle in a way. It's like a blooming flower."

There's a lot of books, from the 1930s, '40s and '50s, that you'll never see again," Wolf says. He still remembers a volume on architecture and photography he saw 25 years ago in a glass bookcase at Mirvish Books in Toronto that sold for $150. "I couldn't even afford to look at it. When I got into this business, I thought I'd be able to pick it up, but it still hasn't crossed my counter."

As for pricing a used book, the general rule of thumb is half the original price, but things aren't always that clear cut.

"There are books you have to sell for less than half price," Raymond says, "because they're going to stay on the shelves for a while.

"You might sell hotter, more recent titles for a little more. There are things you pay too much for, but you find out with experience. There are some books that every shop looks for, such as a Bible illustrated by Salvador Dali that's relatively rare – there was one recently at L'Echange, at about the same price as we had. Sometimes you can sell a book like it was virtually new. I had a volume by (modern composer) Olivier Messaien on the Mozart concertos that's no longer available, and I could sell it for perhaps more than its original price."

Ironically, selling used books precludes being a collector. "It's a conflict of interest," Wolf says. "At home our library is well stocked, but it's not the same as a collection. I'd love to have my 40 or 50 books each on architecture, photography, history, whatnot, but I can't because they have to be sold. If it's a $200 book and I don't sell it, then guess what – I can't afford it. Sooner or later, I'll see that batch of books on photography at home and look at the store and realize I don't have that many books on it. Well, there goes the collection. You're just a temporary custodian at best. It's terrible actually, it really is!"

"It's the human aspect that's fun," Raymond says, "because the shop takes on the colour of your neighbourhood." Mount Royal Ave., home to a string of used-book shops is "a very human-level street. You wouldn't have that kind of success in, say, Brossard where it's all cars. Used-book shops don't work as drive-throughs. But if there were a couple in each neighbourhood, you'd find a lot of very different shops, and books.

"You're dealing with 20 or 30 people during the day, and they all have different needs. It's a pleasure buying a box of books or records that somebody had lying around in their basement for 10 years. You're giving a second life to something that no longer serves its purpose for someone. That's super-cool. On the other hand, it's always much tougher personally to deal with someone who desperately needs the cash, whether it's their landlord or their drug dealer chasing after them. Often I can't give them the amount they need. In those cases, I'd rather see them go elsewhere than leave here dissatisfied.

"The element of social exchange in this business is the thing that gives me the most pleasure, and it's becoming increasingly rare. Maybe it's the paranoia of the times. My grandparents, even when they went to a big chain like Steinberg or Provigo, knew the people behind the counter. We get to know what our customers are looking for. I love books, I love music, I love talking about them with people. My clientele becomes part of my surroundings. You can't find that on the Internet. And that's the saddest thing about today's world, the inability to deal with other people face to face."

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AREA CODE 514 FOR USED BOOK SHOPS

Westcott Books, 2065 Ste. Catherine St. W., 846-4037
Vortex, 1855 Ste. Catherine St. W., 935-7869
Librairie Astro, 1844 Ste.Catherine St. W., 932-1139
Footnotes, 1454 Mackay St., 938-0859
Ex Libris Books, 2159 Mackay St., # 100, 284-0350
Odyssey Books, 1439 Stanley St., 844-4843
Cheap Thrills, 2044 Metcalfe St., 844-8988
Bibliomania, 460 Ste. Catherine St. W., # 406, 933-8156
The Word, 469 Milton St., 845-5640
S.W. Welch, 255 St. Viateur St. W., 848-9358
Volume, 277 Ste. Catherine St. E., 844-3475
Librairie Marché du livre, 801 de Maisonneuve Blvd. E., 288-4350
Bouquinerie Saint-Denis, 4075 St. Denis St., 288-5567
L'Echange, 713 Mount Royal Ave. E., 523-6389
Bouquinerie du Plateau, 799 Mount Royal Ave. E., 525-5628
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